



IDENTITY AND MISSION OF THE LAITY



Cover: Picture from: *Sulle strade dell'Esodo*

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METHODOLOGY

1. Gathering time for recollection (prayer or song)

2. Objectives of the handbook 9

- promote awareness of the dignity of the vocation of the laity and encourage their commitment and responsibility in contributing to making the world more humane and welcoming,
- enhance life and participation skills to coexist in the world and in the Church in communion with all the world people, avoiding every form of competition and distortion and becoming reliable witnesses to the Gospel, signs of hope for humanity.

3. Use of the handbook

- Each participant, after a few minutes of reflection, writes on a piece of paper or on a common poster some keywords that he/she associates to the theme of this handbook.
- Each one describes and comments briefly on the words written on the poster.
- Together they read the handbook starting from one or more paragraphs.
- Any questions that can be answered at later time is collected

4. The final sharing can revolve around the following questions:

- Comparing what emerged in n. 1 and 2, are there differences, correlations, new aspects...?
- In our situations, beginning with our families, how can we foster appreciation for the various vocations?
- What is the connection between the Gospel and my daily choices? Is the Eucharistic celebration transforming my lifestyle and my relationships?
- How can we think, plan, and act in an effective way 'remaining' in the Lord?
- What decisions can contribute at all levels to break down prejudices and barriers and to promote fraternal relationships in the various spheres of society and Church?
- What are the ways of transmitting respect for the foreigner, for the little ones and the disenfranchised anywhere we live, work, study...?
- How do we recognize and value all the good that is already present and at the same time, continue to denounce social and economic injustices that also take place at political circles?
- How do we establish equal relationships especially where the other person needs reassurance?

5. Evaluation

Fill out the form that is distributed

6. Conclusion with a prayer or a song

The purpose of the following reflection is not to present a comprehensive and an all-encompassing study of the vocation of the laity in the Church and in the world. In fact, this complex topic arouses over and over again heated debates with different inflections, according to the ecclesial contexts. The following pages, rather, are intended to highlight certain aspects that can stimulate personal and group discussions. To stop and to reflect in order to rediscover the most profound motivations for one's own commitment, is imperative so that the trust and passion for God and humanity that the Gospel gives us may always be rekindled anew. This is what the world needs in order to advance the process of humanization already underway: we were born as men and women, but we are still in the process of becoming human beings. This is attested to by the numerous inhuman life conditions in which a great number of people, migrants and non-migrants alike, are marginalized by the throwaway culture. Every calamity, such as the difficult situations caused by the pandemic with its serious economic consequences, befalls more acutely on the weakest and most vulnerable people.

Recently, Pope Francis stressed that "a society deserves the qualification of 'civilized' when it develops antibodies against the throwaway culture; when it recognizes the intangible value of human life; when solidarity is actively practiced and safeguarded as the foundation of coexistence".¹ The Gospel, which preserves and promotes the human being, can produce precisely those antibodies that block at the very source any possibility of threatening the dignity of the person.

In fact, the Word of God is alive and effective (cf. Heb. 4:14) and can transform people and, ultimately, societies. This existential and socio-political pre-eminence of the Gospel is entrusted in a particular way to the laity, whose mission cannot be defined "in a purely functional way by motivating it to today's missionary condition or by defining it simply on the basis of functions and rights".² For this reason we will try to highlight not so much the functions and activities that belong to the laity, but rather some aspects regarding their identity and mission: two dimensions inseparably linked together. Thus, it will be possible to give rise to a lifeblood capable of nourishing and ignite, in the most diverse expressions of daily life, the unique and exceptional response of each lay person to his or her vocation.

¹ Pope Francis, Speech to the participants of the plenary assembly of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Jan. 30, 2020, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2020/january/documents/papa-francesco_20200130_plenaria-cfaith.html

² W. Kasper, *Chiesa cattolica*, page 334

In order to grasp some fundamental aspects of the lay person's vocation, we need to broaden our vision on the identity and mission of the whole Church in which the lay faithful, as baptized, participate with full rights. In fact, starting from an all-inclusive vision of the Church and its relationship with the world, it becomes possible to envision the specific vocation of the laity without weakening it or distorting it, as it can easily happen when we begin by comparing it with other Christian vocations (e.g., the priestly vocation).

An essential point of reference in this regard is the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). We are still today in the midst of its appreciation, specifically for what the re-evaluation of the lay vocation is concerned. To this effect, Pope Francis is also moving forward with particular resolve in the implementation of the Council's declarations, as his words and actions testify.

The Second Vatican Council represented a springtime for the Church, made possible thanks also to the return to the genuine sources of Christian life and theological thinking (Bible, the theology of the Fathers of the Church, liturgy) that had been somewhat lagging behind and that a 20th century renewal movement had helped to bring to light.

The Church needed a 360-degree renewal to rediscover the closeness and the language capable of dialoguing with contemporary society. She had strayed too far from the world that had changed so much in modern times. For this reason, John XXIII, moved by a simple but profound trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit, decided, surprising everyone, to convene the 21st Church Council. It was an event that he envisioned not condemning doctrines and people, as it had happened in previous Councils, that were gathered to counter the errors of faith, but ushering in a 'new Pentecost'.

The so called 'Copernican turning point' of the Second Vatican Council concerns precisely the topic we are now engaged in. It is the Church's novel understanding of her identity and mission and, consequently, of the specific vocation of the laity. The Church becomes "more deeply aware of her own essence, that in history she had already lived by and acted upon".³

A GOSPEL FOR THE WORLD AT THE CENTER OF THE CHURCH

The Council clearly reaffirms that the fundamental mission of the Church is to offer to the world the Gospel, that is salvation and source of new life for all. The most genuine originality of the Council "is not to be found, therefore, in any novel theological visions or in specific leg-

³ W. Kasper, *Chiesa Cattolica*, page 23

islative reforms, but rather in the re-proposal of the evangelical "Good News". This is the most astonishing"⁴ and innovative one.

By placing the biblical texts, especially the Gospels and their historicity, at the center, the Church 'rediscovers' (this term expresses a novelty in continuity) the figure of Jesus Christ in its fullness. His person is no longer considered prevalently only from the point of view of his divinity and astonishing nature, but also from that of his fully human and ordinary nature, whereabouts we ultimately discover the 'dwelling place' of who God really is and who mankind is for Him. The Council highlighted the fact that at the center of Christianity there is a historical event, the person of Jesus Christ, and not a book or a myth. In fact, the Gospels are not a set of doctrines, but the story of God who, by entering the human race, gets personally inserted into history and offers to men nothing less than himself! The Church recognizes that revelation is not primarily a doctrine, but an episode of person-to-person communication, that is a dialogue. God comes unconditionally to every person and "out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. " (DV⁵ 2). God lets himself be known in order to invite man to be a sharer in his own life, which is communion in diversity, exemplified by the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that is love.

In the light of this mystery of God, the Church 'rediscovers' herself as a mystery of communion! Consequently, from this fundamental understanding, a renewed interpretation of every segment of the Church is seen as an icon of community. She reassesses her relational fabric within and without, trying to reweave it according to this fundamental principle, thus giving preeminence to diversity while keeping unity, one at the service of the other.

After a period of considerable thrust centered in herself, it is precisely by de-centralizing that the Church attains her most genuine identity and mission. It was by abandoning a predominantly juridical self-understanding as a 'perfect society', which had placed her above the world toward which she looked with disdain, that she recognized she was being part of the world. She was called primarily not to communicate with the world as a teacher, but to live in it, with it and for it as the People of God, in solidarity with the whole human race. The world in fact has been in need of salvation yesterday as well as it is today. It urgently needs salva-

⁴ Cfr. S. Xeres, *La Chiesa, Corpo inquieto. Duemila anni di storia sotto il segno della riforma*, Ancora Milano, 20112, 262.

⁵ II Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 1965. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_it.html (available in several languages).

tion, that is, to rediscover the way to peace, to justice and to communion in diversity. "The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (Lumen Gentium, LG 1). With these words the Constitution on the Church expressively indicates from the beginning her essential reference to the world and to communion, as well as to the centrality of Christ, which emerges from the first two words from which it takes its name: Lumen Gentium (light of the nations / the people), a title that points to Jesus Christ and not to the Church!

THE "SPEARHEAD" OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN THE WORLD

A new dialogic sensitivity crosses the Church and moves her doors wide open. She is compelled to go out and get close to every person. She is called to seek dialogue with everyone, at 360 degrees, as attested by several conciliar documents dedicated to a variety of topics (the modern world, other Christian faiths, other religions ...), which previously she did not consider as 'partners', worthy of interacting as equals. With trust and humility, she listens to these realities, even to contemporary atheism, that until then was considered and judged as harmful.

So, the Church learns to discern the 'signs of the times', that is, the presence and action of the Holy Spirit everywhere, even outside of the ecclesial context. History and world are recognized as a 'theological place' where to grasp "precious and convincing indicators (as they come from the Spirit!) for the Church itself"⁶.

As the Church pointedly speaks to all human spheres and not only to the ecclesial community, she shows her desire to cooperate in searching for solutions to the main problems of our time (cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, GS 10). She does so in a particular way by presenting the mystery of mankind in the light of Christ, who "precisely by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear." (GS 22).

This openness favors the possibility of rethinking and classifying all the world's realities to the all-inclusive awareness that every man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God.

If, therefore, the Church exists at the service of the world, then it can be said that her mission is fully fulfilled precisely in the laity as well explained by Walter Kasper: "(...) neither the ministry nor the Church as a whole are an end in themselves, but the Church is rather an instrument of God's action in the world and a sign of the coming of his Kingdom. The Church serves for the sanctification of the world and of life. But the sanctification of the world and of life is clearly the mission of the laity.

⁶ S. Xeres, *La Chiesa, Corpo inquieto*, 269.

Therefore, it concerns the undertaking and the purpose of the Church. It follows that the ministries of the Church are not performed as an end in themselves, but as means in order to achieve the proper end and purpose of the Church”⁷. In this sense, the lay faithful can be considered as the ‘spearhead’ of the Church’s mission in the world.

BAPTISM, SOURCE OF UNITY IN THE DIVERSITY OF VOCATIONS

It is not unintentional that the Second Vatican Council avoids starting its document presenting the Church in the hierarchical structure, as the initial text had presented. Instead, it chooses to begin with the “common participation of all in the office or ministry of prophet, priest and king of Jesus Christ. In doing so, it begins with that is common to lay people, as well as with priests and bishops. That is the common ground of all subsequent distinctions, it embraces them and continues to subsist in them. It begins with the common priesthood of all the baptized”⁸.

By emphasizing the same dignity of all the baptized faithful and, at the same time, communion in the diversity of their vocations, the Council brings about upending the hierarchical-pyramidal perspective. These prior teachings placed the clergy at the top and the laity at the bottom with a disproportion of dignity. It was also expressed in the use of the very term, ‘lay’, as a negative connotation of a ‘non-ordained’ state.

The laity are, therefore, no longer seen with delegated authority, as an extension of the ministry of the clergy (“longa manus”). They are recognized that “they do not possess their vocation and their mission through an assignment received from the Church’s ministry and sharing in her mission, but from Christ himself, by virtue of their baptism in the Holy Spirit. They ought, therefore, to carry out their mission in the freedom of the Holy Spirit, and in communion with their brothers in Christ. Hence their dignity and mission are established in the roots of baptism and spring out from the inherent nature of baptism”⁹. Indeed, this is the most impelling reason why - as highlighted at the beginning - it is not sufficient to motivate the mission of the laity as a mere functional service.

Consequently, there appears to be an effort to offer a positive description of the laity (*Christifideles Laici*, ChL 9). For example, it is symptom-

⁷ W. Kasper, *Chiesa cattolica*, 319.

⁸ W. Kasper, *Chiesa cattolica*, 319.

⁹ W. Kasper, *Chiesa cattolica*, 334. In order to motivate the common priesthood, we are frequently reminded of the First Letter of Peter (2:4-10) in which it emerges that the sacrifice of the priesthood of Christ, offered once and for all, inserts us through baptism - which makes us children in the Son, members of the body of Christ - into that priesthood. Christ with the newness of his priesthood (see “The Liturgy of Life”) has conclusively fulfilled the salvation of the world, but does not exclude man’s collaboration, on the contrary, it comprises it. God counts on each of us.

atic that the term 'vocation', used mainly to indicate the priestly and religious states of life, is now referred to all, including the laity. We can no longer restrict any Christian states of life to be of grade "A" and others of grade "B". One's own vocation is the 'ideal' condition to open up to the Kingdom of God and contribute, in small and big ways alike, with personal life options, family decisions or professional careers, to the ongoing humanization process.

EXPLORE THE POTENTIALS OF BAPTISM IN THE WORLD

"It is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life that comes from Baptism, the sacrament of faith, so that this knowledge can help that person live the responsibilities which arise from that vocation received from God." (ChL 10).

The lay person is, therefore, given the opportunity to explore the enormous relational and humanizing potential, inherent in baptism while remaining within the ordinary context of society. Let us try to highlight some dimensions of these regenerating potentials.

With baptism the person is immersed in the love dynamics of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is called to participate in his or her own way of life. To this reality the concept of "exodus", that is the moving out of one's self, fits in. At Easter, in fact, a well-defined lifestyle is celebrated. The Resurrection is not to be seen only as the victory of life over death. The core interpretation of Jesus' resurrection is more profound: it is the model of life that Jesus lived that overcomes death. Self-interests (thank God!) do not resurrect. It is the Crucified - a life given without reserve - who is resurrected. Between the Crucified Lord and the Risen Lord there is an inseparable identity: together they form one single mystery of Easter. Seen together, the cross and the resurrection constitute a surprising and challenging joyful news¹⁰.

Love conquers death: that kind of life that moves out of one's self, at times considered as wasted, sterile, useless, inconclusive, incapable of making history. It is precisely this 'weakness', the weakness of the crucified love, so strong as to overcome death and any other shade of it. Here and now! What else can happen when men and women, facing those who suffer, bend over their wounds to relieve pain? When facing divisions, they walk the paths of dialogue and reconciliation? When facing injustice, they forgive? When facing violence, they respond with meekness? When facing inhuman and degrading rejections they welcome the others as equals, in giving and in receiving? Isn't this the way life is engendered? Is this not the model pattern of the lay people? Is this not the true freedom, the freedom from oneself, that Christ communicated

¹⁰ Cfr. B. Maggioni, *I racconti evangelici della passione*, Cittadella, Assisi 2006, 321.

to His own through the gift of participation in His royal ministry, which is the personal call and option to serve and to love?

REMAIN AND GO IN ORDER TO BEAR FRUIT

“Baptism regenerates us in the life of the Son of God; unites us to Christ and to his Body, the Church; and anoints us in the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples.” (ChL 10). Thanks to this sacrament we are, so to speak, grafted into the life of Jesus Christ, like a branch in the vine, becoming ‘children in the Son’. From that moment we are given to live the life of Jesus, to love His love, to forgive His forgiveness.

If we remain in Him, our life becomes fruitful, as we read in John’s Gospel: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who remains in me and I in him, bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Nonetheless, shortly afterwards, Jesus invites to ‘go’ and be pro-creative: “I have chosen you and I have constituted you so that you may go and bear fruit and your fruit will remain” (v. 16). What at first glance might seem a contradiction, in reality, preserves the profound dynamics that permeate and unite the identity and mission of the lay faithful.

It is not, in fact, a matter of remaining still, but dynamic. When we remain in the Lord, living in friendship with Him (Jn 15:14-15), we participate more and more in His tenderness and passion for the world and for everyone who sets his heart, head and feet in motion to serve as He did. To remain in God means being sent to men and women to live with them and for them. It is as though God had said: “Come on, let’s be together and together do something beautiful for the world! The lay faithful can be called missionaries in all regards. Indeed, they not only have a mission, but “are a mission in this world”¹¹. There is nothing that describes a person better than his/her specific mission. Men and women, in fact, discover themselves not by asking the question ‘Who am I?’ This question may not find an answer and may add frustration, but they should ask ‘Whom am I for?’ Such question is “capable of opening the way to a personal adventure and a relationship that has the taste of freedom”¹².

THE LITURGY OF LIFE

In the New Testament there is something truly new about the liturgy, “not because it is spiritualized (...) in comparison with the pagan and Jewish worship, but because worship is totally centered in the event of

¹¹ Francesco, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in today’s World, 2013, n. 273. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (available in several languages).

¹² Cfr. P. Sequeri, *La cruna dell’ego. Uscire dal monoteismo del sé*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2017.

Jesus Christ, whose service - to God and to mankind - was expressed not in ritual gestures, but in the concreteness of his life, of his existence and of his person"¹³.

It is this "nitty gritty" existence, with its relations, with its joys and sufferings, with its lights and shades, that becomes liturgy, as an offertory! This is precisely the purpose of liturgy: to transform the life of the lay faithful into an existence that more and more gives glory to God, thus living up to the standards of having been created in the image and likeness of the Son of God, up to the sublime state of love (priestly ministry).

The "Eucharist sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life" (LG 11), is not in fact destined to remain only on the altar or in the tabernacle - it would be "a reduction," would say Blessed J.B. Scalabrini¹⁴ - but to transform mankind and, consequently, all areas of society. "There is no setting, rich or poor, atheist or believer, into which this new understanding and concept of sharing and communion of life cannot be any other way conceived, because based not on quantifiable assets, but on the Eucharist"¹⁵. With the Eucharist, which nourishes the filial life of Jesus, an incredible potential of personal, family, social and political transformation falls correctly into the hands of the lay faithful.

The lay faithful are called to proclaim (prophetic ministry) with their very existence, not as much that they love God, but as much that God loves the world, as the only response to mankind's deepest thirst. The lay faithful are encouraged to bear witness to the Gospel in the ordinariness of existence with their lifestyles. The world, the secular state, becomes the sphere of the laity's vocation, the place where to "seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God". It is precisely here that the call of God is addressed to the laity by contributing to "the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven." (LG 31)

The Council speaks of a "place" - as described by Christifideles Laici No. 15 in dynamic terms: the lay faithful "live in the world, that is, in every one of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very fabric of their existence is woven". They are people who live everyday

¹³ B. Maggioni, *Un tesoro in vasi di coccio. Rivelazione di Dio e umanità della Chiesa*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2005, 109.

¹⁴ For Bl. J.B. Scalabrini the Eucharist "is a storage of wheat and it would be a crime to hide. He who hides the wheat will be cursed by the people' (Prov 11:26)". "[...]. If this ferment is introduced into the Church [...], into the different social levels, that is to say, into the ruling classes, the youth and the families, it will make this broken world more sensible. It will gather together the scattered peoples into the one body of Christ. (J.B. Scalabrini, First Speech to the 3rd Synod of the Diocese of Piacenza, 28.08.1899)

¹⁵ Missionarie Secolari Scalabriniane, *Tratti di spiritualità scalabriniana*, Stoccarda 1996, 28.

life in the world, study, work, establish friendly, social, professional, and cultural relationships, etc. The Council considers their condition not simply as an external and conditional fact, but as a reality destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of their life vocation (cf. LG 48). On the contrary, it affirms that “the very Word made flesh willed to share in the human fellowship. (...) He sanctified those human ties, especially family ones, which are the source of social structures. He chose to lead the life proper to an artisan of His time and place.” (GS 32)”.

Thus, for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological one as well. (ChL 15). The lay faithful not only belong to the Church and find reference to her, but they are Church in the world (cfr. ChL 9, citing Pius XII).

Pope Francis calls by name a temptation to which lay people and clerics are equally exposed, namely, that of “thinking that the committed lay people are those who engage in some kind of church activity, specifically in a parish or in a diocese”¹⁶. This approach does not define their role: there are no grade “A” and “B” ways of living the Gospel. This vision may end up fostering even further the dualistic classification that separates the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane’.

In reality, the presence of Jesus surpasses once and for all the separation between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. Thus, the space of the sacred widens its definition to include now all places and all people. It is a space that does not envision any borders. It is a different definition of liturgical space that emerges, “no longer as a local space but as a relational one (...). The extension of this new holy space is communion”¹⁷.

Finally, the following observation is an interesting one: “If the ‘culture of separateness’ tends to constrain liturgy in a temple, the ‘culture of dialogue’ calls for the encounter of faith the history of men and women within the places where it takes place, starting from home, thus rooting liturgy in the life of the world”¹⁸.

A DIALOGIC IDENTITY

The identity of the baptized faithful is, in fact, dialogic. As we have been reflecting, baptism does not remove the lay faithful from the world by placing them in a ‘protected zone’. On the contrary, they are immersed even more radically in the events of history with its challenges

¹⁶ Pope Francis, “Letter to Card. Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America on the Role of the Laity”, Vatican City, March 19, 2016. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-ameri-ca-latina.html (available in several languages).

¹⁷ B. Maggioni, *Un tesoro*, 188.

¹⁸ G. Campanini, *Il laico*, 205-206.

and contradictions. Jesus who died and rose to life is not the defeat of dialogue, but his condition of possibility: his unreserved love for each person is the foundation for an authentic encounter with the other.

Those lay faithful who live at the cutting edge of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious differences, in a particular way, are bound not to remain on a peripheral identity, unable to interact with human beings and to discover that unity with the other is not so much a horizontal identity (passport, culture, religion, etc.). This, in fact, creates patterns that exclude diversity. They are called to a vertical and inclusive identity: that of the children of God. It is an identity that enables them to embrace all people and to relate to the multiple diversities without stereotyping them. This gives rise to the awareness that the diverse cultural identities are conditional: in fact, none can be considered absolute, yet all of them are precious because all of them are endowed with the means of communication to enter into relational dialogue with others. Precisely these correspondingly respected relationships, that make possible giving and receiving, welcoming and being welcomed, knowing and making oneself known, that also allow those other ones that have been brutally degraded in their dignity and dishonored, to feel once again like human beings. This is the experience of a young asylum seeker who, faced with the warmth of being welcomed, exclaimed: "This is the first time since I fled my country, that I feel like a man again".

CONTEMPLATE REALITY AND COLLABORATE WITH THE GOOD

The lay faithful are given to live in the various settings of the world by trusting in the Holy Spirit who is at work to fulfill God's plan, a new Pentecost. It is an untiring action that thrusts them to examine and to promote the good wherever it may be and to collaborate with those who plan and act, placing the sacred dignity of each person at the center. However, it does not follow that the witness to God's plan comes true automatically.

There are many events that seem to hamper, or even reject, the possibility of a peaceful coexistence where differences are considered a gift and not a threat. This may discourage and threaten hope especially for those who are committed to making our societies more human and hospitable for all. To look only with one's own eyes it is easy to let oneself be deceived by what is taking place: evil seems to prevail over good. To contemplate the world, that is, to look at it with Jesus' eyes fixed on God the Father, it becomes feasible to perceive surprisingly the seeds of reconciliation that grow even in the deserts of our cities. To let our gaze be transformed by the Paschal mystery will allow us to foresee the blossoming of a new humanity. This may not be without any struggle or sacrifice. It is a new horizon in spite of the encounter-confrontation between people belonging to diverse cultures, ethnicities, religions. It is

not the pains of an agony that leads to death, but the pains of childbirth englobing all humanity as it is destined to give birth to a new life, a reason for joy to all (cf. Rom 8:18-25).

To contemplate suggests looking with love and hope at ourselves, at the others, and ultimately at God who wants every person to unconditionally live for eternity. Authentic service to humanity begins at the bottom of this meditative contemplation that precedes and accompanies every activity. It is like a glance of kindness that hovers on the other person, regenerating him/her. It is like a glance that unleashes a blossoming of love that is able to trek new paths at the service of person and communion.

To give rise to re-founding societies, above all, it is necessary, as sociologists also point out, to have the courage to change the way we relate to each other. In fact, many things can be done for others, but if this happens by looking down on them, then, instead of being reassured, they are once again humiliated. In doing so nothing will change substantially in society since there continues to be a difference between benefactors and beneficiaries, between natives and foreigners, between rich and poor, between bosses and subordinates¹⁹.

On the other hand, if we start from the Paschal Mystery, it is possible to recognize that with his blood Christ united everyone into one human family, fostering the awareness of a deep mutual belonging. It is not difficult to imagine that our societies would become more human if each one looked at and treated the other as family and not as a problem to be solved, a number, a disposable article. They would change the way they relate to each other in their professional, social, political and economic decisions. All and each one would give their best by placing their skills at work to find and implement the most humane solutions.

LAY FAITHFUL AND MIGRATIONS

“The Church’s rich variety is manifested still further from within each state of life. Thus, within the lay state diverse “vocations” are given, that is, there are different paths in the spiritual life and the apostolate which are taken by individual members of the lay faithful.” (ChL 56).

In the field of migration there are lay people who generously collaborate with the Missionaries of St. Charles, women and men religious, both founded by Blessed J.B. Scalabrini, father and apostle to the migrants. This saintly man knew how to read the signs of the times upon listening to the word of God and the world. He was able to recognize the phenomenon of emigration, taking into consideration the laity and their commitment in the world and in politics. This happened in the 1800s, as

¹⁹ A. Varsalona, “La nostra vocazione specifica nel mondo della mobilità umana”, in *Sulle strade dell’esodo* n. 3 (2011) 25-30. <http://www.scala-mss.net/rivista/ssde/11/art/11n3a6.html>.

he faced an adverse current mentality. Therefore, he can truly be considered a forerunner of the Second Vatican Council.

The Scalabrinian lay people are “men and women, adults and young people. After undergoing a stage of missionary formation, they make a commitment to evangelizing at the local Church level in synergy with the Missionary Scalabrinian Congregations. They are guided by the same prophetic charism and compassion for migrants and refugees, regardless of culture, religion or language (...)”²⁰.

A SECULAR INSTITUTE WITHIN THE SCALABRINIAN FAMILY

“In the field of a “commonly shared” lay vocation “special” lay vocations flourish.” (ChL 56). In this context we have seen “a blossoming of several forms of secular institutes” whose members - while remaining lay people - are called to give radical witness to the demands of baptism by living their consecration through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in the full expression of their lay condition. They live in the world taking up jobs or professions in the most diverse situations as the ‘salt and leaven’, as the Gospel speaks about.

Within the Scalabrinian Family there is a Secular Institute, called the Secular Scalabrinian Missionaries, who began their mission in 1961 in Solothurn, Switzerland, with Adelia Firetti. From the spirituality of the incarnation and communion of Blessed J.B. Scalabrini, whom they are inspired to, they assumed “the profound Christocentric vision. They developed a wholesome capacity to work drawing from the One above. They are able to combine contemplation and action in such a way as to shaping the way of seeing and living the everchanging and often painful reality of migration, in the perspective of faith. The world of human mobility, more than an uninhabitable desert, is then understood as the place where God himself becomes close and near in Christ: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35)”²¹.

IN CONCLUSION, OR ALMOST THERE...

As we focus on a particular state of life, we see with renewed energy emerging a vital link between the countless vocations in the Church: one points to the other, and in turn this one comes to the service of the first. Then together they reflect the beauty of the light of Jesus Christ for the benefit of all humanity.

²⁰ See this at <https://www.scalabriniani.org/laici-scalabriniani> as well as www.scalabriniane.org.

²¹ M.G. Luise, voce “Missionarie Secolari Scalabriniane”, in G. Battistella (a cura di), *Migrazioni. Dizionario socio-pastorale*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2010, 658. Si veda anche www.scala-mss.net.

One of the images used to define the Church is expressively the one of the moon, which does not shine with its own light but reflects that of the Sun. The Church - with all her singular vocations - “is as beautiful as the moon, because she is illuminated by the light of her Spouse”. This is the way a ninth century monk writes, taking an image so dear to the early Fathers. The Moon-Church is beautiful and attractive when, “basking in the rays of its own Sun, she sees her own natural opacity become a carrier of light, albeit always less. On the contrary the Church-Moon remains depressed and insignificant when she wants to act on her own, or worse to replace the Christ-Sun, and she ends up shedding no light at all to anyone. It is therefore because of that essential bond with Christ - and exclusively with His light, that is, that is His allure that attracts souls and melts hearts. This is the basic description of two thousand years of Church history. Moreover, it offers to the disciples the opportunity to radiate light in every place and at every time in order to reach every man, as a reflection of that light which appeared fully in Christ (Jn 1:9)”²².

We may then say that the Church ‘grows old’ and irrelevant when she lives for herself, while she ‘rejuvenates’ and rejoices when her words and actions reflect the Gospel. The Church will then be able to renew people while she weaves an interpersonal fabric that allows everyone, even the poorest and most marginalized people, to raise their heads and take a deep breath. This most credible proclamation will unfold the communion in diversity that is sought, suffered, rewarded, and lived in the Church and in the world, everywhere and at every levels. In this the presence of the lay faithful’s witness is essential.

Keywords: laity, identity, mission, Church, world, Gospel, II Vatican Council, baptism, shared priesthood, communion, service, dialogue, witness, proclamation, migration

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²² S. Xeres, *Chiara di luna. Tempi e fasi della missione nella storia della Chiesa*, Ancora, Milano 2008, 7

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